

Legends of Which North? Anglo-Saxonism and Old Norse Literature in 1950's America

Research Thesis

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English author Olivia Coolidge published *Legends of the North* in 1951. The work introduces Old Norse literature and mythology to a general audience, organizing twenty-four stories amongst four sections: *Tales of the Northern Gods*, *The Last of the Volsungs*, *Tales of the Northern Heroes*, and *Tales from the Sagas*. Coolidge also provides a list of prominent mythological figures and a list of proper names. A retelling of Old Norse literature on its surface, *Legends of the North* co-opts its subject material for another purpose. The book reasserts an American version of Anglo-Saxonism that originated with colonial writers and remained popular into the nineteenth century. Coolidge claims her subject material for a fabricated American-Anglo-Saxon race and uses this material to illustrate this race's superiority.

A brief introduction to Anglo-Saxonism and its American adaptation is in order. Hugh A. MacDougall's 1982 *Racial Myth in English History* defines Anglo-Saxonism as a conviction amongst Englishmen that they were "peculiarly manly, honorable, [and] apt for leadership" and that their social institutions were "superior to those of any other people" (MacDougall, 89). It is an "explicitly racist interpretation of English history" (MacDougall, 94) that ties social and governmental institutions, individual temperaments, and religion to the idea of an Anglo-Saxon race. This race existed as an idea only. Its origins trace back to the Anglican Reformation, when clergymen engaged in an academic campaign that championed the idea of an uncorrupted Anglo-Saxon church, peopled by an Anglo-Saxon race, to justify their split with Rome (Horsman, 10). The intellectual movement grew in the centuries that followed, revising the English settlement story to emphasize its Germanic ancestry and a connection to the tribes of Tacitus' *Germania* (Horsman, 11). By the nineteenth century, few English historians would admit that there indeed was no homogenous group of Anglo-Saxons.

Anglo-Saxonism extended to England's American colonies. Puritan thought emphasized how God had ordained their settlements; a successful revolution against Great Britain and a subsequent period of impressive growth confirmed for the new Americans this ordination (Horsman, 3). An American brand of Anglo-Saxonism thus emerged, defining American-Anglo-Saxons as a superior race "destined to bring good government, commercial prosperity, and Christianity to the American continents and to the world" (Horsman, 2). The country's westward expansion bolstered these sentiments, and American-Anglo-Saxons soon thought of themselves as members of a "distinct Caucasian race" with a pioneering and industrial prowess that set them above other races (Horsman, 5). Michael Modarelli, in *The Transatlantic Genealogy of American Anglo-Saxonism*, succinctly defines the movement as an American "elaboration of white racial lineage" whose "culmination of cultural capital" and "superior innate endowments" justify "national and global domination" (Modarelli, 5).

Coolidge's work is a mirror image of this definition. *Legends of the North* champions a predominantly blonde-haired, blue-eyed, courageous "race of warriors and pioneers" (Coolidge, x) who, like the gods they worship, fight against evil and injustice. She identifies Old Norse literature as a hallmark of this race's cultural capital, together with Leif Eirikson, Beowulf, Shakespeare, Morris, and Wagner. Published in America for an American audience, the book's jacket claims that its subject material "provided background for some of *our*¹ greatest literature, music, and drama." Coolidge's northern race is white, virtuous, and responsible for American success.

¹ My own emphasis.

The American-Anglo-Saxonism within *Legends of the North* manifests itself most noticeably in the work's color ideology and mythological narrative. Coolidge ascribes a moral alignment to many of her characters - they are either good or evil - and she uses color to flag this alignment. There is a racial element to this ideology: heroes with blonde hair, blue eyes, and lighter physical characteristics are decidedly more virtuous than characters with darker traits. Her characters' virtue mirrors that of the gods, whom she introduces as supernatural beings tasked with protecting the world against the forces of evil. *Legends of the North* thus rearticulates the American-Anglo-Saxon idea that its chosen people are "part of the grand religious historical plan of the primary race" (Mordarelli, 10): the people of the north are religiously endowed with physical and moral superiority. The following exploration of the racial-mythological narrative outlined above will expose *Legends of the North* as the work of American-Anglo-Saxonism it is.

The Brave and the Beautiful: White Racial Lineage

"Courage chiefly elevates these stories, since in them the hero accepts with a fine exultation every test of his power to endure" (Coolidge, x). Coolidge thus introduces *Legends of the North*, promising protagonists of remarkable daring and resiliency. The introduction fails to mention that these heroes share characteristics beyond their impressive temperament. Beauty is important to Coolidge: ideal heroes have ideal physical characteristics to match. In *Legends of the North*, the ideal physical traits are blonde hair, blue eyes, and light skin. These characteristics flag virtue. The opposing traits – nondescript "dark" physical features – flag vice. Like the American-Anglo-Saxonists before her, Coolidge is creating a unique white identity superior to others in morality and virtue. She then contextualizes this identity atop a hierarchy of physical characteristics that span from human to decidedly not human.

Coolidge's adaptation of *Volsunga Saga* reveals this white racial lineage. She introduces Sigurd as just short of perfect: " 'Surely there was never before a young man so handsome and strong' " (Coolidge, 90). A defining feature of Sigurd's physical perfection is his hair. It was not until Sigurd had become "a tall, golden-haired lad" (Coolidge, 88) that Regin knew the Volsung was ready to face Fafnir. Sigurd's only flaw is cognitive: "Of the evil workings of Regin's mind," narrates Coolidge, "he understood nothing at all" (Coolidge, 89). He nevertheless compensates with a strong intuition, feeling "the cold craft behind" Regin's affection (Coolidge, 89). Strong, tall, and handsome heroes do not need to be smart if they trust their gut.

Legends of the North describes Brynhild in a similar manner. The Valkyrie's blue eyes met Sigurd's when the hero removed her helmet, revealing "a mass of golden hair" that framed "the face of the loveliest woman his eyes had ever beheld" (Coolidge, 106). Sigurd and Brynhild's beauty contrasts sharply with that of the Nibelungs. Where the former two are bright and golden, Coolidge describes the latter as dark. She identifies Gudrun as "the dark flower of the wood" who stares intently at Sigurd with "dark eyes" (Coolidge, 109) despite the hero's indifference towards her. She introduces Gunnar as "Dark-haired Gunnar...known for his beauty" despite the fact that Sigurd "was even more striking than he" (Coolidge, 109). The higher value that Coolidge places upon her protagonists' beauty is telling of her work's implicit American-Anglo-Saxonism. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed members of the northern race are above darker human beings.

The contrast extends beyond physicality. The Nibelungs' dark characteristics flag the family's imperfections. Gunnar's worst flaw is envy. Despite his father's failing health, Gunnar expresses greater concern for Sigurd, feeling "that it would not become him to be overshadowed by Sigurd when he was king" (Coolidge, 111). Gunnar lacks the reputation, wealth, and bravery

of Sigurd, and he continuously fails at superseding the hero. Coolidge's color ideology again comes into play when Gunnar, unable to ride through the wall of flame protecting Brynhild, has Sigurd magically alter his appearance: "King Gunnar saw Sigurd's blue eyes change before his own to black" (Coolidge, 114). Gunnar is not as brave or successful as Sigurd; his dark hair and eyes indicate as much.

Gunnar's envy makes him unworthy of Brynhild. "Pride alone bound her to her husband," explains Coolidge, although she "grew daily more distant" (Coolidge, 119). Brynhild eventually confronts Gunnar about his lowly position and identifying him explicitly as a coward (Coolidge, 121). Gunnar's envy extends to the rest of his family. They all agree that Sigurd must die: "I have long envied his treasure" says Guttorm; "It is not well for a king to be always outdone," encourages their mother (Coolidge, 122). All the Nibelungs fall below Sigurd and Brynhild in both beauty and virtue. That Guttorm "smiled with the joy of killing, even secretly in the dark" (Coolidge, 123) reinforces this detail.

Hogni and Gunnar nevertheless redeem themselves. Coolidge's treatment of the Huns has much to do with their redemption. She describes King Atli and his men as dangerous, different, and devoid of self-control: "They were fierce, loud-voiced men, bristling with knives, enormous eaters and drinkers, and tireless dancers to their own outlandish tunes" (Coolidge, 127). Orientalism abounds in her physical descriptions of the people: "His (King Atli's) messengers were short, broad-shouldered men with yellow faces and black, slanting eyes. Their garments were strange and gorgeous, dyed in the rich lands of the East to bright yellow, purple, or green. Gold chains were about their necks, rings on their fingers, and pearls on their embroidered cloaks" (Coolidge, 127). Hogni is subsequently suspicious of the Huns: "I do not like the looks of these messengers," he says, "They are more like cutthroats than nobles, the sort of men who

might be employed by some villain” (Coolidge, 129). The Huns certainly have a fearsome reputation, but Coolidge is coding the Huns as untrustworthy, uncivilized, and even villainous based alone on their appearance and how they spend their free time. They are still human, but they occupy the lowest position amongst the humans of Coolidge’s hierarchy. The Nibelungs may not be as perfect as Sigurd and Brynhild, but the Huns are beneath them all.

Coolidge nevertheless recognizes the Huns as human. The Dwarfs get no such recognition. Sigurd, after consuming the Fafnir’s blood, “understood the cold dwarfs who knew neither conscience nor pity, and who despised mankind for feeling these things;” “he saw how the love of gold burned in Regin, who must kill lest he have to divide” (Coolidge, 103). It is the dwarfs’ greed for both wealth and human emotion that reveals their sub-human nature. To Coolidge, such creatures are evil and deserving of neither pity nor mercy. That Regin strikes first against Sigurd (Coolidge, 103), placing Sigurd in a defensive and justified position, reinforces Coolidge’s harsh judgement.

Regin’s physical appearance in an illustration on page 102 reveals the depths of Coolidge’s racism. Regin’s facial features match those found in American anti-Semitic cartoons of the 20th century: drooping eyelids, a hooked nose, crooked teeth, a protruding lower lip, and a pointed beard. Sigurd towers over the dwarf, suggesting he is morally as well as physically superior. The final insult to Regin’s inferiority comes at the end of the chapter. Coolidge compares the two brothers, identifying Fafnir as a “great serpent” but Regin as “a scheming dwarf” (103). Sigurd finds greater honor for killing Fafnir, despite his less than direct confrontation with the dragon. Coolidge is underscoring the superiority of her northern race. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed heroes trump all to the point that killing an inhuman dwarf is beneath them.

The subordination of dark features to light appears elsewhere in *Legends of the North*. In her adaptation of *Gunnlaugs Saga ormstungu*, Coolidge describes Raven as a man with a “dark, handsome face” only after introducing him as a liar and a spiteful rival to Gunnlaug (201-202). Raven subsequently lies both to Helga about Gunnlaug’s romantic affairs and to Gunnlaug, striking the hero down after promising him safety during their duel (Coolidge, 201, 208). In “The Unending Battle” (an adaptation of *Sörla þáttir eða Heðins saga ok Högna*), Coolidge introduces Hedin’s love interest as “Dark Hild,” a beautiful woman, though there had been “many princesses lovelier than she” (146). Hild’s introduction follows that of the enchantress whom Hedin meets while hunting, a woman “of dazzling fairness” whose “golden hair streamed over her shoulders” (Coolidge, 144). Golden hair’s enchanting power appears again in “Roi, the Fool” (an adaptation of *Hróa þáttir heimska*), when Roi falls in love with “the most beautiful girl he had ever seen” (Coolidge, 219). Coolidge explains how she was “not particularly pretty, though she had masses of yellow hair” (Coolidge, 219). Gunnar falls for Hallgerda for similar reasons in “Gunnar of Lithend.”

A look at Coolidge’s sources provides damning evidence: she is making up many of these physical descriptions. Coolidge introduces individually each of her work’s four sections. The introduction to Part II, *The Last of the Volsungs*, concludes with a reference to William Morris’ *Sigurd the Volsung* (Coolidge, 77). Coolidge only references Morris for his epic poem, but her adaptations of *Gunnlaugs Saga*, *Sörla þáttir*, and *Hróa þáttir* suggest that she is drawing on more of Morris’ work. All three stories appear in Morris’ 1875 collaboration with Eiríkr Magnússon, *Three Northern Love Stories and Other Tales*. Morris’ adaptation of *Gunnlaugs Saga* makes no note of Raven being “dark,” nor does his adaptation of *Sörla þáttir* describe Hild in such a

manner.² Coolidge is similarly fabricating the blonde hair of the enchantress in *Sörla þáttr* and Roi's love interest in *Hróa þáttr*. These fabrications reveal how Coolidge purposefully creates her racial hierarchy in *Legends of the North*. She is creating her own racist "elaboration of white racial lineage" whose members embody the pinnacle of virtue and beauty.

To Look and Act Like Gods: Superior Endowments

"When you come to the shield-roofed hall of Odin where your father sits, the heroes shall rise to greet you as the greatest one of them all" (Coolidge, 91). Odin himself spoke these words to Sigurd, bestowing his approval on the hero for his virtuous life. All members of Coolidge's northern race have this approval. The gods of Asgard were created for one reason: to combat evil. They are descendants of Bure, the "ancestor of the gods" who, "from the moment he beheld the frost giants, knew they were evil and resolved to destroy them" (Coolidge, 4). Coolidge thus introduces the mythology's grand religious narrative: good must triumph over evil.

Humanity inherits this struggle. Says Odin, "These races (the dwarves and elves) are not truly our creation...let us make a new master on earth" (Coolidge, 5). He thus bestows upon humanity an exalted position: they are an indispensable player in the battle of good versus evil, created by the gods to conquer this evil and rule the world. Coolidge's northern race excels in this position. They were a people who had "much to endure" (Coolidge, x) in their struggle, and their mythology reflects this endurance. The mythology also reflects Coolidge's desirable character traits, both physical and temperamental. Blonde hair and blue eyes flag virtuous gods as much as they do virtuous men and women.³ Coolidge's northern race is distinct from the rest

² According to Morris, Hild was "the fairest and wisest of all women" (Magnússon and Morris, 215), a far cry from Coolidge's admission that there were "many princesses lovelier than she."

³ Coolidge is again making up these descriptions. Neither Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* nor The Poetic Edda concern themselves with the gods' physical features.

of the world: they not only inherit the gods' struggle against evil, but the gods' physical likeness and temperament as well. The mythology within *Legends of the North* is an expression of her white racial lineage's heavenly ordination.

It is in her treatment of the mythology that Coolidge first introduces her color ideology. The best gods have blue eyes, and a few have blonde hair. The virtues that these northern gods display link their physical characteristics to the moral good: the features become indicators of how a character within the mythology will act. Thor is the first to receive this treatment. Coolidge describes how his "blue eyes were aflame" when he first meets the giant Hymer (13), and the blue-eyed god surpasses this giant in courage and strength. Thor rows further out to sea than the giant is comfortable with, boldly declaring, "I dare to fish here...all giants are cowards of heart" (Coolidge, 14), and Hymer is similarly struck "dumb with fear" (Coolidge, 15) when Thor grapples with the World Serpent. Thor displays his superior strength when he achieves what Hymer could not: lifting their boat "up on his back with water and whales and all" (Coolidge, 16). Coolidge, in her short "Table of The Chief Northern Gods," ensures readers that Thor is "known by his red beard, blue eyes, and huge hammer" (vii), intrinsically linking the physical trait with the epitome of fortitude and physical ability.

Thor is not the only mythological figure to have blue eyes. Coolidge's first chapter of mythology introduces "Allfather Odin" as the descendant of Bure and the creator of the world (4-5). The chapter ends with Odin consulting a Norn and staring "deep into sunken eyes blue and piercing as his own" (Coolidge, 8), thus linking the physical trait with both the most powerful of the gods and a being capable of prophecy. Although the Norn makes no reappearance in *Tales of the Northern Gods*, Odin remains a central figure. Coolidge uses the Allfather to connect blue eyes to a different set of virtues: patience, reason, and wisdom. She achieves this connection by

juxtaposing Odin and Loki. The former is a perfect foil to the latter. Where Odin is “Allfather” of the world and man, thus father of good, Loki creates abominable creatures like the world serpent and the Fenris Wolf (Coolidge, 30-31). Coolidge aptly bestows upon Loki the title “father of all wrong” (18): an inversion of Odin’s identity.

This foil extends beyond title. Loki’s behavior is contemptable. He complains while traveling with Odin and the god Honer: “In Asgard we live like true gods. Here I am empty and hot, and my feet are sore. What is the use of such journeys” (Coolidge, 20)? Odin answers that they “must travel as men do” for the sake of remembering the earth, but the “father of all wrong” remains unsatisfied (Coolidge, 20). Loki is also impatient, exclaiming “I can wait no longer!” while the gods boil an ox for dinner (Coolidge, 20). Odin is above this impatience, smiling “as he closed his keen blue eye” and calmly instructing Loki to wait until the had given it time (Coolidge, 20-21). Coolidge is tying this grateful/**i**ngrateful juxtaposition to physical traits. Odin, the only god of the group with blue eyes, is also the most grateful and the most patient. The blatantly anti-Semitic illustration of Loki on page 37 emphasizes the racism at play in this ideology.

Loki’s most despicable characteristic is his deceit. He lies to Idun, a goddess “who loved and trusted all,” to save himself from the giant Thjasse (Coolidge,23). It is significant that Coolidge describes Idun as a goddess with “fair blue eyes” (23): she is again connecting the physical feature with virtuous superiority. The gods nearly kill Loki when they learn of his treachery, but Odin alone prevents them and threatens Loki with death if he fails to return the goddess (Coolidge, 26). The episode not only illustrates Odin’s wisdom (he recognizes that Loki acted out of necessity and is responsible for correcting the situation) but also Loki’s worth.

Someone as compassionate and trustworthy as Idun is of far greater worth than someone as deceitful and ungrateful as Loki, thus the ultimatum that he either return Idun or die.

The “father of wrong” commits his most heinous crime towards the mythology’s end, when he kills “Baldur the Beautiful” (Coolidge, 62). Despite Odin’s role as the Allfather, even he admits Baldur to be the greater god. Odin describes Baldur as “the radiant one, the most glorious of the gods...in whose presence nothing unclean or ugly has ever till now appeared” (63). Baldur is indeed perfect: he is “the treasure of the world. He is beauty and unclouded joy, pure goodness that knows no evil” (Coolidge, 63). The description connects perfect beauty with goodness itself. Coolidge does not describe Baldur’s physical features beyond these superlatives, but she does not have to. She has, at this point in the mythology, done a sufficient job at connecting blonde-hair, blue eyes, and fair skin with perfection.

Loki hated Baldur; he “found no delight” in the perfect god (65), and so decided to kill him. Loki’s deceit is again on display, having “cunningly hidden his thoughts for a long time, so that none suspected that he wished Baldur harm” (65). The method of execution, having blind Hoder unknowingly slay Baldur with a mistletoe dart, cements Loki’s contemptibility. He is deserving of his name and deserving of his punishment. The gods chain him to a rock cliff, where he will endure poisonous torture until the end of the world (Coolidge, 75). Coolidge is emphasizing the justice found within the mythology. It is a religion that champions virtue while punishing villainy, tying both with physical appearances.

It is also a religion that resembles Christianity. Baldur’s death would be temporary: the perfect god “would arise from the dead” after the Day of Doom, when good at last triumphs over evil (Coolidge, 70). It is a Christ-like parallel, reinforced by the fact that Hoder would be no longer be blind following Baldur’s resurrection. Coolidge thus establishes a connection between

Norse belief and Christianity, resolving the latter's eventual triumph over the former and the issues this triumph would present for its ordained race. Coolidge's Christ-like treatment of Baldur underscores how in-tune this northern religion was with Christianity: it was not the great religion of the Anglo-Saxon people, but it was close enough. Even Odin prophesied that he would be replaced by something greater than himself.

Coolidge's Norse-ordained northern race thus becomes the Christ-ordained Anglo-Saxon race. It is a treatment of Norse mythology that mirrors the work of the Anglo-Saxonist thinkers before her, championing their free-spirited Germanic ancestors as inspiration for Protestantism's triumphant break from an oppressive Catholic Church (MacDougall, 95). Coolidge's northern race is a part of this religious narrative. Inheriting both the perfect virtues and perfect physical appearance of the gods, they are destined to master the earth. This mastery of course would not reach its apogee until they adopted a more perfect religion practiced by the Anglican church. The mythology, in conjunction with *The Last of the Volsungs*, presents a "white racial lineage" with "superior innate endowments."

The North and Beyond: Cultural Capital and Global Domination

The mythology meets another criterion central to Modarelli's definition: justified global domination. In her chapter "The Wooing of Gerd," Coolidge justifies Gerd's coerced marriage to Frey as beneficial to the unwilling daughter of a giant. Frey possess a life-giving power best illustrated during Skirnir's approach to Gerd's hall. Coolidge describes the hall as "a huge black shape against the grey mass of snow" (45): a rocky, cold, and desolate scene that Skirnir, riding upon Frey's horse, transforms into "a broad path" of green grass and bushes (Coolidge, 47). Coolidge describes Gerd as a product of her environment. She is "frozen-hearted," "ice-cold," stranger to life and happiness (Coolidge, 44-46) who could clearly benefit from Frey's life-

giving power. Gerd's refusal makes a point: lesser beings are unable to recognize what is good for them. It is a racist belief central to American-Anglo-Saxonism and championed by those who wished to justify the country's expulsion, extermination, and enslavement of blacks and Native Americans for the sake of progress and global betterment (Horsman, 3).

According to Coolidge, this northern race has already accomplished much. Her primary introduction to *Legends of the North* claims Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a Norse-inspired tale (Coolidge, x) and her introduction to Part III boldly claims *Beowulf* as a work written in "Anglo-Saxon, the language of the Norse people who settled in England" (Coolidge, 137). She similarly claims Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelungs* (Coolidge, 77). Coolidge's publication history extends the cultural accomplishments of her northern race beyond the north Atlantic. Coolidge first published a book on Greek mythology in 1949 and followed *Legends of the North* with *The Trojan War* (1952), *Caesar's Gallic War* (1961), and *Lives of Famous Romans* (1965), implying a shared cultural relevance between *Legends of the North* and the Mediterranean. Her two-part biography of Abraham Lincoln (1974-76) and a 1999 biography of American physician Silvester Gardiner extends this relevance to the American continent.

The introductory sentence to *Legends of the North* solidifies the connection. "The legends of the Norse people," it reads, "are as rough and exciting as Leif Ericsson's famous voyage" (Coolidge, ix). Coolidge thus presents a body of tales written by a supposedly perfect white race whose gods had ordained them for global domination and who lay claim to famous works of literature, Roman statesmen, and the United States. It is an "elaboration of white racial lineage" whose "culmination of cultural capital" and "superior innate endowments" justify "national and global domination." It is a work of American-Anglo-Saxonism from the 1950s, and this author is

curious as to just how pervasive the ideology was across both the Medieval Scandinavian field and the United States at the time.

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